

WHAT WE CLAIM IS:

1. A method of preparing meals characterised by the steps of:
 - a) using automated means to place food portions of different types into at least one oven wherein each food portion is contained within a mould; and
 - b) cooking the food portions in an oven; and
 - c) using automated means to remove the food from the oven; and
 - d) assembling the individual food portions into a meal within a package using automated means.
2. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the oven is an in-line oven.
3. A method according to claims 1 and 2, wherein the oven is capable of being programmed to operate to cook the food according to its type.
4. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 3 wherein the mould is baseless and contains at least one lip.
5. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 4 characterised by the further steps of:
 - a) retaining the food portions after they are cooked in a holding area; and
 - b) identifying when different types of food portions are to be retained in the holding area and retaining the food portions for a sufficient period so as to coordinate the assembly of a complete meal.
6. A method according to claim 5, wherein the holding area is a blast chiller.

7. A method according to either one of claims 5 or 6 wherein the period that the food portion is retained is determined by the core temperature of the individual food portion.
8. A method as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 7 wherein the apparatus used for removing individual food portions from a mould includes:
 - a spatula; and
 - a mould holder,

the method characterised in that the operation of the spatula and the mould holder are configured so that:

 - a) the spatula can slide under the mould; and
 - b) the mould holder lifts the mould to separate the food from the mould where it is held upon the spatula.
9. The method claimed in claim 8 further characterised by the step of:
 - c) exerting pressure on the food portion to remove it from the mould.
10. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 9 whereby food portions are retained in position in a packaged meal prior to heating characterised by the further steps of:
 - a) placing the food portions within an edible sauce within the meal package;
 - b) chilling the edible sauce thereby increasing its viscosity sufficiently to retain the food portions as positioned within the package; and
 - c) liquefying the sauce for consumption by heating.
11. A monitoring means when used with the method claimed in claim 1 characterised in that the monitoring means includes:

- a) a means for assigning a unique identification to each individual food portion; and
- b) sensors for measuring values of one or more predetermined parameters of the process for said identified portions.

12. The monitoring means as claimed in claim 11 wherein the unique identification is determined by the order the portions entered the process.

13. The monitoring means as claimed in either one of claims 11 or 12 wherein the food portions are placed on trays and the trays are provided with individual codes.

14. A monitoring means as claimed in any one of claims 11 to 13 wherein each individual food portion will be assigned a further alphanumeric code.

15. A monitoring means according to either claim 13 and 14 wherein the tray code and the individual portion code are linked to form a complete portion identification code.

16. A monitoring means as claimed in any one of claims 11 to 15 wherein one parameter measured is the core temperature of the food portions.

17. A monitoring means as claimed in any one of claims 11 to 16 wherein one of the parameters measured is duration of the process at specific points during the process.

18. A method of using the monitoring means claimed in any one of claims 11 to 17 characterised by the steps of:

- a) assigning individual food portions a unique identification code;
- b) measuring parameters with sensors; and
- c) recording the measured parameter values against each individual food portion creating a history for each.

19. A method of claim 18 characterised by the further step of initiating an action against a food portion when parameter values in said history fall outside a specified parameter range.
20. The method of either claim 18 or 19 characterised by the further step of:
 - d) collating each individual history to form a complete meal history capable of being analysed.
21. An automated mould holder when used with the method as claimed in claim 1 including:

at least one mould holder capable of engaging with the mould and subsequently lifting the mould;

a mould evacuation means; and

a spatula to retain a food portion evacuated from the mould.